

What Happens When a Christian Sins?

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The title of this article is put into the form of a question because it adequately expresses the heart-searching cry of every believer. Its importance is demonstrated by the fact that about eighty per cent of the devout and godly people voice it in one way or another. It is safe to say that the other twenty per cent have faced it although they may not have expressed it in so many words. Any question which has elicited so much interest and deep concern is not to be lightly set aside as of little consequence. And where there is heart yearning and heart searching, there is not only something of deep importance but also something to which there is divine response. God desires to give an answer to every true seeker.

This question is *insistent* as any spiritually sensitive believer will attest. For sin is no trifling matter. It was sin that introduced all the misery and distress into the universe. It was sin that called loudly for the judgment of God and hurried the Son of God to Calvary. The heart instinctively recognizes the fact that sin is bad no matter where it is found, in the unbeliever or the believer. But the very fact that the positional standing, the personal status, and the prospective state of the believer was changed when he believed argues strongly for a difference in the nature, penalty, and correction of the believer's sin.

As usual, the answer to every heart cry is in the Word of God. Human speculation is dangerous. It begins with ignorance, follows the path of the blind, and ends in the ditch of despair and doom. Intellectual confusion on this point is almost as dangerous, for it mixes error with truth to the point of nullifying the truth and routing the believer through the wilderness of suffering and uncertainty. Divine revelation alone may be trusted to give the unadulterated truth. It supplies adequate information so that the believer may order his steps in the will of the Lord.

The answer to this question must deal with *three things*. It must deal with the character of the believer's sin, the consequences of the believer's sin, and the correction for the believer's sin. These three things will be treated in this order.

I. The Character of the Believer's Sin

The character of the believer's sin may be described by three statements. In the first place, it is always sin; in the second place, it is an act of sin; and in the third place, it is awful sin.

It is always sin (1 John 5:17). By means of a clear statement which was addressed to believers everywhere, the Apostle John, under the direction of the Spirit of God, was combating an error that was prevalent in the early church and is likewise prevalent today—namely, that there are some aberrations from the Way of which the believer is guilty, but they are not to be classed as sins. But the Word of God stands out boldly against this error, "All unrighteousness is sin." There is no difference between acts of unrighteousness, as though one could be called a mistake and another could be called a sin. For the moment that it is admitted that there is

a difference, at that moment the door to sin is thrown wide open and men become insensitive to the awfulness of sin. By their own standards they class sins, lightly excusing themselves for that which they regard as mistakes. But God has no double standards. Any want of conformity to the will, the ways, or the nature of God is sin and must be treated as sin, whether it be in the believer or the unbeliever.

It is an act of sin (1 John 3:9; 2:1). While the nature of sin is not changed when one becomes a Christian, the occurrence of sin does change. By virtue of the new birth, which is the implantation of the very nature of God, the believer is rendered unable to continue in a course of sin. "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). This statement does not mean that the believer will not commit any sin, but it does mean that he is unable to lie down in sin, revel in it, make it his daily habit and practice. The presence of the new nature makes this impossible, for the new nature controls the will, imparts new desires, and makes sin distasteful. But the presence of the old sinful nature often catches the believer off guard, and he falls into sin, so that no believer ever dare say that he has not sinned (1 John 1:10). For such a one there is provision made: "And if any man sin [once], we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). For those who lie down in a course of sin, the evidence that they have not been born of God, for them there is no advocate. What they need is a propitiation first of all, and having accepted Christ as a Saviour, then they can enter into His advocacy.

It is awful sin (1 John 2:1; Luke 12:48). This statement stands in contrast with the general opinion of most believers. But it has the support of the Word of God. Becoming a believer increases the responsibility of men instead of decreasing it. More light increases the responsibility (Luke 12:48). The believer knows that it was sin that put Christ upon the Cross. He knows that the least of sins would have demanded the Cross. He knows that the sole mission of Christ into the world was to take away sins (1 John 3:5). Knowing all these things about sin, he knows that there is not any place given to sin in the plan and purpose of God. Therefore, he must hate sin, fight sin, cast his vote against sin. That is why John wrote as follows: "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not [even once]" (1 John 2:1). Absolutely no provision is made for sin in the life of the believer. Knowing this and knowing how awful it is, sin is therefore worse for the believer than for the unbeliever.

II. The Consequences of the Believer's Sin

Sin in the believer has its consequences just as it does in the unbeliever. There is penalty for the performance of sin. There is pollution of the person who sins. And there is the power of sin over the believer. It is inevitable that each one of these should take its toll.

First, *the penalty for sin, is death* (Rom. 6:23). This law is as unchangeable as God himself, for God's holiness does not change, and therefore his holy aversion to sin cannot change. It is ever true that "the wages of sin is death." This death is twofold, consisting of physical death which is the

separation of body and soul, and spiritual death which is the separation of the soul from God. This is the same penalty that is inflicted upon the unbeliever, the fullness of which will be realized in the Lake of Fire. But since this is true, a tremendous problem faces believers. In their efforts to solve the problem many believers have gone astray, some of them contradicting many of the plain teachings of the Word of God, and robbing not only themselves but many others of the assurance which God has provided for every one of His children. The solution for this problem will be dealt with under the next main point of this article.

Second, *the pollution of sin is defilement* (Matt. 15:18-20). This is the thing that Christ was attempting to impress upon the minds of the ritualistic Pharisees. What physical dirt is to the body, sin is to the soul and spirit. And this is an unalterable law, as universal in its scope as the law of sin and death. It includes the believer and the unbeliever alike. When they sin they are defiled by the sin. And when the believer sins he becomes personally dirty. He looks dirty, he feels dirty, he is dirty, and he knows he is dirty. When he lies, steals, covets, thinks evil thoughts, he is bound to feel besmeared with sin, uncomfortable, and conscience-smitten. The more closely he comes to the light of the knowledge of the glory of God that shines in the face of Jesus Christ, the more clearly he is enabled to see the dirt which he feels. That is the reason Paul exclaimed at the close of his life that he was the chief of sinners.

Third, *the power of sin brings defeat* (John 8:34). Here again the law is unalterable. Wherever sin is in dominion, there the sinner has been defeated and made a slave, bowing the knee in the most abject slavery. "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." While the believer does not live in a course of sin, it is still true that at the moment he sins he is the bondsman of sin and has suffered defeat. At that moment his potentialities, his passions, his possessions, his plans, and purposes are under the control of another who has vanquished him in the battle of sin and righteousness. The sting of defeat is bitter and almost unbearable. So humiliating is it sometimes that the believer has almost surrendered to the enemy and would have, had it not been for the wonderful provision made for this very thing in the life of the believer. Let it be said here though, that there is continuous defeat in the life of the unbeliever, while defeat for the believer is momentary.

III. The Correction for the Believer's Sin

At this point, the marvelous provision for the penalty of sin, the pollution of sin, and the power of sin should be noted. This provision is to be found in the "Lamb of God," the "Word of God," and the "Spirit of God."

The Lamb of God (1 John 1:7). It has already been pointed out that the penalty for sin is death, a law which is as unchangeable as God Himself. The believer's sin, then, must be punished with death. Now Calvary is the answer. There the Lamb of God shed His blood for the sins of all men of all time. At the moment of faith in Christ, the blood of Christ covered every sin of the believer up to that point. But after the believer was saved, he sinned, and this sin must be punished with the same penalty, so the only provision that could be made was that the efficacy of the blood might flow on, cleansing the believer from each sin as it is committed. That is precisely what the Word of God declares, "And the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). The word "cleanseth" is in the present tense which means that the blood keeps on cleansing the believer from the penalty of sin. Were it not for the continuous

cleansing power of the blood, the believer, just like the unbeliever, would be under the inexorable wrath of the living God.

The Word of God (Eph. 5:26). This is the remedy for the pollution of sin. While the blood may take away the penalty for sin, the believer is still dirty with his sin and he needs to be cleaned up. There is only one agency provided for this task, and that is the Word of God. Our Lord Himself told the Apostles that they were clean through the word that He had spoken to them (John 15:3). Later the Apostle Paul declared that it was the Word that Christ uses to cleanse His church. That is done "with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:26). To provide an illustration for His people, Christ washed the disciples' feet (John 13:1-10), thus symbolizing the "washing of water by the word." The work is accomplished in this way. The believer reads the Word of God wherein he finds the perfect will of God for every believer. It exposes the believer's sins, and he confesses them one by one and forsakes them. Thus 1 John 1:9 is fulfilled, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Surely this makes it clear how important it is for the believer to read the Word of God daily.

The Spirit of God (1 John 4:4; 5:4). While the blood of Christ will do away with the penalty for sin, and the Word of God will clean away the dirt of sin, there is always the presence of the old sinful nature with its power to produce another sin, and to bring defeat into the believer's life. To offset the spirit of sin within, there is the Spirit of God who indwells the believer. The Spirit of God is greater than the spirit of sin (1 John 4:4) and enables the believer to triumph progressively over the world, "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 John 5:4). This means that the believer who places his trust in the power of the indwelling Spirit is enabled to live a continuous life of victory over sin. There may be times when he falls into sin, but those are always the times when he fails to keep his eye upon the powerful Spirit within. But the indwelling Spirit makes it impossible for the believer to live in sin. His presence assures the believer that there will be one grand train of progressive and increasing triumph. This continuous life of victory is the evidence that the believer will finally attain the gates of glory.

What happens when a Christian sins? In character, his sin is always sin, it is an act of sin, and it is awful sin. In consequence, it brings death, it produces defilement, and it marks defeat. In correction, the blood of the Lamb of God flows on, cleansing from the penalty which is death; the Word of God continues its ministry, cleansing from the pollution of sin; and the Spirit of God energizes for continuous victory over the power of sin. The character of sin is awful; the consequence of sin is horrible; and the correction for sin is wonderful. But the wonder of the provision for sin should so magnify the grace of God that the believer will shrink from the consequences of sin and hate any and all sin.

Comfort for Dark Days

"When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (Isaiah 43:2).